

Profiles in Arson: The Vanity Firesetter



This case illustrates that firefighters should be on the lookout for witnesses at the fire scene who are overly helpful or offer too much information.

Michael felt a little better today. He had stayed up most of the night watching television, finally falling asleep about 4 a.m.

It was now 2:30 in the afternoon and it looked to be a nice day outside. Michael glanced around his sparsely-furnished apartment and spotted the large pile of dirty clothes on the floor of the closet. His good mood began to fade.

His train of thought went from the dirty clothes to the need for some loose change for the apartment building's washer and the necessity of walking 10 blocks to the store for that change. The only other alternative was to ask the old bat of a manager if she would change a few dol-

Continuing our series on the motives for arson, this month we take a look at the vanity firesetter. The vanity arsonist suffers from a variety of psychological problems, some of which may cause physical complications, as well. The case history detailed here, that of "Michael,"* is a classic example. His personal and financial troubles mounting, Michael knew how to make himself feel better and more worthy . . . by setting fires.

By JOHN L. ORR
AFJ Correspondent

**Names have been changed for the purposes of this article.*

lars and save him the long walk.

Even though the manager, Mrs. Arvizu, was in the process of evicting him, she was usually civil to him. They had gotten along well at one time, but the loss of his last job made it impossible to pay the rent. And Michael just hadn't felt well enough to look for another job. He was constantly depressed.

Michael left his second-floor apartment and walked past the laundry room. He noticed that there was a new key-type bolt lock on the door. The lock had been installed after several break-ins, but Michael wasn't aware of this.

It seemed to him that the lock was there just to keep him out. He tried not to concentrate on that thought,

but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed that this was the only possible reason for the lock.

Michael peered out into the yard and saw that no one was around. A smile slowly spread across his face. He knew exactly what he was going to do. After all, he had used fire to get back at people in the past.

He flashed back to Jack, his former friend. He had set fire to Jack's car after an argument. . . .

Michael briefly considered confronting Mrs. Arvizu about the lock, but reasoned that starting a small fire in the room would better serve his purposes. First, it would give him a reason to break into the room. Second, it might make Mrs. Arvizu think a little more highly of him if he discovered the fire and "saved" the building.

It took only seconds for Michael to act. He stepped into the garage from a side door and found a screwdriver. He then forced the lower panel of the laundry-room door's window and put it inside the room. The floor of the laundry room was cluttered, as always, with clothes and old newspapers.

Michael looked around once more and reached into his pocket for a matchbook. He lit the edge of a newspaper and tossed it into the laundry room onto some old clothes. He waited a second to see it start the clothes burning then went back to his apartment.

Now he opened his door slightly and looked down the breezeway towards the laundry room. He could see a small amount of smoke drifting out of the window.

Michael's heart had begun pounding, and it thumped even louder when he saw a sudden increase in the smoke volume. Fearing that the fire might get too large, Michael opened his door and stepped out into the breezeway.

From the top of the stairs, he noticed the tips of flames now coming through the screen and pushing an even larger volume of smoke into the air.

Michael felt a sudden rush that filled him with pride. He thought, "I did that! That's my fire!" As he stepped back towards his apartment, he debated when to put the fire out.

He stumbled at his threshold, but held onto the door jamb and continued staring at the fire. This was fabulous!

Suddenly, the upper window panel

shattered from the heat and dropped to the ground. Instantly, Michael ran down the stairs shouting, "Fire! Fire!" He banged on the other two doors on his floor as he ran.

Then, thinking that the fire might be getting out of his control, Michael ran to the garden hose in the backyard. He shouted towards Mrs. Arvizu's apartment and threw a lawn chair at her back porch to get her attention. She was hard of hearing and Michael wanted to be sure she knew what was happening.

As he reached for the garden hose, he found the handle to turn it on missing. "Damn her!" Michael fumed, remembering that Mrs. Arvizu kept it inside her house so the tenants wouldn't use the hose and "her" water to wash their cars.

Then he remembered the fire extinguisher in the hallway. He ran to it and broke the glass with his fist. Miraculously, he didn't cut himself.



The gas line was cut on the underside in an attempt to hide the fact that the fire was non-accidental.

As he approached the laundry room, he saw that the smoke had died down and the flames were now subsiding. He again shouted, "Fire!" and saw Mrs. Arvizu standing nearby. He told her to call the fire department. She said she already had.

Michael told her to get back "in case the gas blows!" He peered into the window and saw that the pile of clothes was burning itself out, but, nevertheless, he attacked it as if it were spreading.

After he discharged the extinguisher, he heard the approaching sirens. Using Mrs. Arvizu's key, he entered the room, but began to choke from the cloud of fire extinguisher powder, so he stepped back outside.

Then he remembered something

from the past. He immediately dropped to his knees, while continuing to shout at Mrs. Arvizu to stay clear.

Michael was pretending that he was overcome by smoke. He had done it before and it always worked. He felt a tremendous feeling of release and pleasure.

Michael coughed loudly as he stuck his head inside the room and sucked in one last breath of the smoky atmosphere. He then dragged himself back into the yard and lay down as two firefighters ran by him towards the fire.

He coughed extra loud and one of the firefighters noticed him on the ground. The fire captain talked into his radio, announcing, "A small fire, now out. Return all companies. Out 10 minutes for a report."

Michael felt disappointed as the attending firefighter stood up and told the captain, "He's okay, just

a little overcome by the dry powder." Michael was then ignored, as the firefighters talked to Mrs. Arvizu. They told her that the fire appeared to have been due to an electrical short; there was little damage and they were leaving.

Michael, now sitting up, was asked by the firefighters if he wanted an ambulance. In disgust, he said no.

After the firecrew left, Michael talked briefly to Mrs. Arvizu, but was met with a cold shoulder. She didn't even mention Michael's "heroic" actions and even asked him, "Did you have anything to do with that fire?"

Michael called her a senile old witch and berated her for not appreciating his actions.

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ciating his actions in saving her building.

Unknown to Michael, an arson investigator checked out the fire damage several hours later and declared the fire an arson by an open flame applied to the pile of clothes. Mrs. Arvizu was also interviewed and related her suspicions about Michael.

However, the fire captain who called the fire "accidental electrical" was upset by his "oversight" being pointed out, so he didn't feel the need to pass on the information about Michael's presence. And Mrs. Arvizu also left out many facts about Michael's actions.

Michael's depression continued through the following week. Each time he stepped out of his apartment he could smell the smoke residue. Interestingly, although it further depressed him, it also brought back memories of the wonderful feelings he had experienced as he fought the fire.

He obsessed over the fire, as well as several others he had set over the past few years. This always revitalized him and motivated him to go



This wood saw was identified by the lab as the one used to cut the gas line, however, no fingerprints were found on it.

for long walks, go to bars and talk to people.

As he relived those fires, he felt reassured that he was a valuable person. His heroic actions at the fires validated him.

Every chance he had, Michael talked to people, even strangers, about the latest fire. He was truly innovative about guiding conversations towards the topic of his heroics. In fact, Michael kept a scrapbook about the fires and several other instances where his name was in the paper.

Michael is a classic example of a vanity pyromaniac. He set fires when he needed attention most. Dur-

ing the last few months he had experienced unemployment and the breakup of one of his sporadic relationships — plus his estranged girlfriend had just given birth to his child.

Fire was Michael's tool. It was as if it was his job, and he couldn't wait to go to "work."

Michael typically set fires infrequently, because of his overwhelming guilt and fear of being caught. However, his life had been getting progressively worse. He was fired from his last menial job after they didn't recognize his "superior" intelligence and didn't promote him quickly enough. Viewed as a poor employee, frequently tardy and irresponsible, he was fired when the manager couldn't stand Michael's "attitude."

Michael had also developed a skin disorder that made his public appearance unacceptable to the manager. The skin disorder was also typical of the physical problems brought on by Michael's deep psychological difficulties.

As if all this wasn't enough, Michael was also a chain smoker, notorious liar and a loner. He had no close personal friends.

Michael didn't drink much, but during the week following the latest fire, he bought a bottle of bourbon and nearly emptied it. On Friday of that week, Michael spent part of the day looking for a job and returned home depressed again. It seemed that no one wanted him.

He finished the bottle of bourbon and fell asleep early in the evening, unusual for him. At about 2 a.m. he awoke, still feeling lightheaded.

He opened his front door and inhaled the leftover smoke smell. It again gave him a rush, and he decided to do something constructive.

He remembered a table in his apartment that needed a small repair, so he walked downstairs to get the tools

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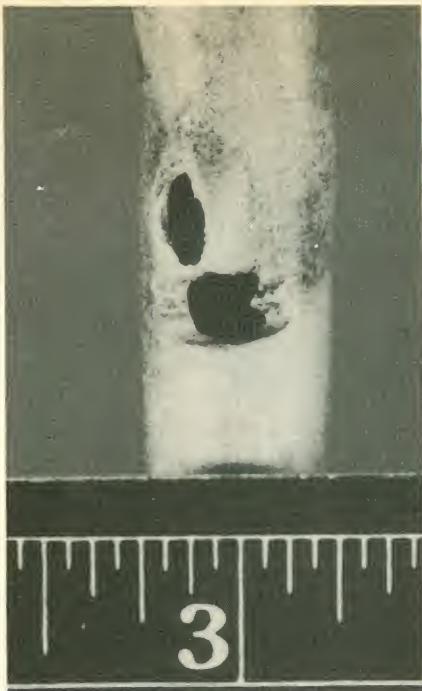
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The water heater gas line. Two distinct cuts were deliberately made; the third hole is due to the "torching" effect of escaped gas.

he needed from Mrs. Arvizu's garage. It was late, so he walked quietly to the side door of the garage, only to find it locked. "That witch!" thought Michael, "She never locks the garage door."

Michael then remembered an adjacent storage room, filled with old furniture. One wall of the room had a large hole in it, large enough to crawl through into the garage.

Michael climbed over the furniture and found himself at the breech. He entered the garage and got the tools he needed. As he climbed back into the storage room, he looked down and saw the small flame from a water heater also in the room.

Almost without thinking about it, Michael reached back through the breech and found a wood saw on the workbench. He picked it up and began sawing the aluminum piping leading to the water heater's control valve. He had to stop because the cutting angle was not good.

He pulled a small table back and found the room he needed. He smelled gas instantly and cut several more strokes before throwing the saw back into the garage. He quickly exited the room.

As he walked into the warm night air, he took a deep breath and felt his heart pounding like never before. He relaxed for a moment, only to be brought back to reality as the escaping

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To prevent the blade from binding during cutting operations, use the following procedures:

- Adjust the blade guard to control proper cutting depth.
- Enter all cuts at full RPM and regulate the speed of the saw by increasing or decreasing the "feed" pressure.
- While cutting, make certain the blade is kept at a right angle to the surface being cut.

This is easily accomplished by setting the saw on the roof and pulling the saw through the material to be cut.

- Always cut in a straight line. Do not twist the saw to either side.
- Release the throttle and immediately remove the blade from the cutting surface if binding occurs, to avoid belt damage.
- Always use the lower portion of the blade for cutting purposes.

If the upper portion of the blade is used for cutting, the blade may start climbing in the cut and throw the saw up and back towards the operator.

Never operate a rotary saw without a blade guard. The guard should be adjusted so that the rear section is

close to the workplace. Particles, dust or sparks from cutting will be collected by the guard and directed away from the operator.

Generally, carbide-tipped wood cutting blades are the most-effective blades for ventilation operations. Carbide-tipped blades have carbide tips brazed to a steel blade. These blades are very effective for cutting wood, light sheet metals and lexan plastic. After each use, check for carbide tips that are missing or have a visible radius.

Remember that a rotary saw has a limited depth of cut (usually 3½ inches to 5 inches) depending on the type and model of saw). Additionally, it is difficult, at best, to "feel the construction" in wood roofs when attempting to determine rafter direction and spacing with a rotary saw.

During emergency operations, an appropriate tool should be carried to facilitate adjustment of the belt or provide a blade change if necessary. A belt can be quickly rendered unserviceable if improperly adjusted.

Our next article will overview the chain saw, blowers, and the "drop bag."



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gas found the pilot light. Michael heard a small whoosh and saw the flames at the rear of the storeroom. He quickly ran upstairs.

As he sat in his room, he again felt a rush, accompanied by a lightheaded feeling and a huge, satisfied smile.

He had only been in his apartment for seconds when he looked out to see thick, black smoke pushing out of the storeroom. The flames in the room quickly reached temperatures over 1,200 degrees and the foam-padded furniture exploded, creating a flashover.

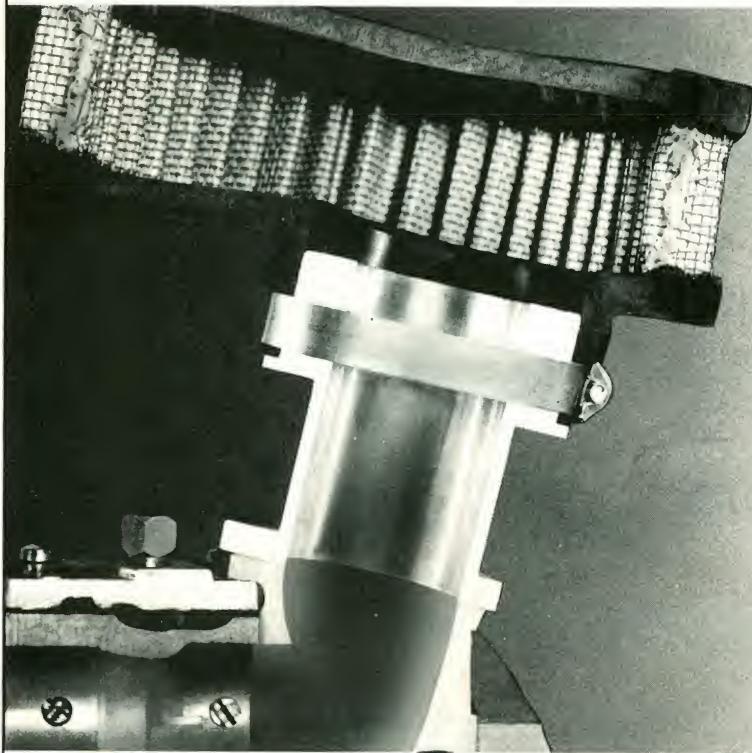
Michael had left the door open and he could actually hear the fire blowing out, searching for more air.

Genuinely afraid by now, Michael ran out of his apartment screaming, "fire!" After all, his apartment was right above the inferno!

He found the garden hose, and Mrs. Arvizu, seeing the magnitude of the fire, didn't hesitate to give him the handle to turn on the water. Michael stayed well back away from the flames but allowed himself to get into the smoke.

Continued on next page

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It seemed like forever before the fire trucks arrived, but Michael wasted no time falling onto the ground gasping for air. The firefighters gave him oxygen then paid little attention to him. It was the same crew that had responded last week to the laundry-room fire.

After Michael was "revived," he blended into the crowd. He stayed well back until the firemen started to leave and a man with "Investigator" stencilled on the back of his jacket walked into the fire area.

Michael approached, fascinated with this new aspect to his fires. Someone was actually going to investigate the fire's cause! This had never happened before.

He forgot his earlier trepidation and threw himself in the role of "victim." He pestered the investigator about his findings as the room was examined.

Michael was so avid that the investigator had to escort him out of the building. He finally threatened Michael with arrest if he didn't stay out.

Initially, the cut gas line was not

noticed, and probable cause was listed as "combustibles too close to the water heater."

After several minutes, however, Michael again approached the investigator. He said he knew who might have "set" the fire.

A brief interview was held and the fire scene re-examined. The cut gas line was now discovered. The investigator, who was not the one who investigated the earlier fire, was told of the previous arson the week before.

The investigator's suspicions grew as he realized Michael was being overly helpful in assisting with the investigation, even to the extent of offering a "suspect." (This suspect was later eliminated because he was actually in jail at the time of the fire.)

The investigator recognized Michael's personality as a possible vanity pyro and gave Michael just what he needed, someone to pay attention to him. He praised Michael and was later actually shown the scrapbook Michael kept. Michael skipped over several pages, keeping them from the investigator's view.

The other articles were about Michael's actual heroics in chasing

a purse snatcher and his participation in various civic activities. Michael seemed quite intelligent, just lacking in self-esteem, and very lonely. The pages he skipped contained articles about other fires Michael had been involved with — fires he had set.

The investigator hoped that by befriending Michael, he could motivate him into either a confession or, at the least, not setting any more fires!

Two nights later, however, the garage next to the storeroom caught fire. Again, Michael discovered the fire and this time was transported to the hospital suffering from smoke inhalation.

The fire itself was very small and was obviously discovered in its incipient stages. Minimal burn damage was present, and it was this lack of advanced damage that brought to light a significant fact.

As Michael was interviewed about the scenario of this latest fire, it was obvious that, the way he told it, the fire could not possibly have happened.

Michael said he was walking down the street when he saw smoke "pouring" out of the garage door. As it

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happened, the fire's origin was right next to the breech in the rear wall, and all the smoke went out through that opening during its minimal burn time. The garage door was closed. The fact that there was only minimal surface burning and no smoke could possibly have been visible from the street gave the investigator probable cause to arrest Michael.

The investigator went to the hospital to talk to Michael, only to find that he had removed the IV from his arm and walked out after two police officers interviewing him had accused him of arson. The emergency-room nurse also said that Michael had self-admitted himself two nights before claiming he was injured "while fighting a fire."

Apparently Michael had walked over two miles to the hospital and checked in after the water heater/storage fire and the interview with the investigator. He craved attention so much that he went to the hospital ER to get further gratification at 4 a.m.!

The ER nurse also said that Michael had given the impression that he was a police officer by providing his work address as the local police station. Again Michael was in a fantasy world, trying to build himself up.

The investigator traced Michael's path back towards his apartment, and

located him just five blocks from home. Michael was placed under arrest and taken to jail.

After booking procedures, Michael was escorted to an interview room and advised of his rights. He readily waived his rights and agreed to talk with his "friend," the investigator.

The investigator, armed with training, experience and a strong gut-feeling, approached Michael as a confidante in an effort to establish a reasonable interview atmosphere.

The courts generally frown on this type of tactic in a "Miranda-ized" interview. The aura of "closeness" created by the investigator could legally be construed as a "softening up" of the suspect. It is similar to "making a deal" by promising certain favors or leniency.

The investigator, knowing of these rulings, still chose this avenue, thinking that his rapport with the suspect was the most likely way to elicit a confession.

The tactic was reasonably successful. Michael did not admit to starting the first fire in the laundry room, but did indicate that he was in the storage room minutes before he discovered that fire. He also admitted "hanging out by the water heater next to the hole in the wall" after he secured the tools he was looking for.

During the interview, Michael said that his head began to ache as he tried to remember anything specific about the fires. Asked about the garage fire, Michael remembered going into the burned-out storage room and entering the garage before the last fire. He also related that he remembered using paper matches to provide light as he wandered around the garage.

Michael added that, after he climbed through the breech in the wall, he stood there and lit the entire book of matches then dropped them back inside the garage. The investigator took special note of this statement, as the fire's point of origin was at that very location. Michael said that he blacked out after that and his "head was aching."

These statements, stopping just short of an actual confession, provided sufficient information to place the suspect near the fire origin minutes before its discovery. However, they didn't provide a motive. Juries like motives.

The district attorney's office filed two counts of arson against Michael. Both counts were "wobblers." They can be filed as a felony, but generally are plea-bargained to misdemeanors after preliminary hearings. The DA's office likes to file winning cases, and

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ARSON . . .

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this one was questionable.

The DA did feel confident that Michael was the arsonist, but was afraid that a judge and jury would not accept a fire department investigator's testimony on psychological motivation. This was no open-and-shut case.

Prior to a preliminary hearing, Michael's attorney asked for a jury trial on the misdemeanor charges. The defense attorney's feelings were that his client, Michael, would stand a better chance by having this type of hearing rather than a preliminary hearing and a superior court trial. He knew that the prosecutor had a weak case.

The case was indeed weak, and the lesser, misdemeanor charges, might at least result in some sort of help for Michael. The DA agreed to the "bargain." The investigator had little say in the matter and deferred to the DA's experience.

The DA spent a great deal of time with the investigator in preparing the case for trial, knowing that it was probably a loser. The DA explained that, although a part of the investigator's training encompassed the psychological makeup of various types of fire-setters, this type of testimony was only allowed from mental health "experts." The county couldn't justify a complete mental evaluation for such a small case.

Additionally, Michael's previous fire history was not admissible in court. It was found that Michael had been the discoverer of at least three other fires. During the post-arrest interview, he also admitted to actually setting two previous fires. Unfortunately, the statute of limitations had run out on the previous fires, and Michael couldn't be charged with them.

As expected, the jury trial did not go well. The investigator tried desperately to verify cause and origin, burn time and Michael's statements in an effort to convince the jury of Michael's guilt. The effort failed and Michael was found "not guilty" of the charges.

Michael walked away free and quickly moved out of the city to another nearby jurisdiction. Michael was later a suspect in the murder of a prostitute. He also was arrested for stealing from an elderly woman he had befriended. After serving six months in the county jail, he disappeared. 

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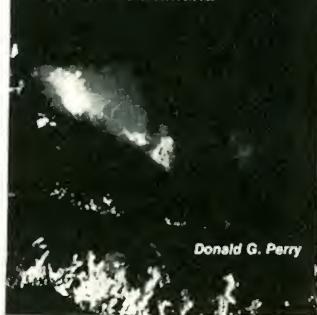
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September 4-8 - Fire '89 is at the Metropole Hotel in Birmingham, England, in the National Exhibition Centre. Contact: Reg Haley, Conference Secretary, Institution of Fire Engineers, 14 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7QB. Tel. 0533-553654.

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